

The Daily Breeze (<http://www.dailybreeze.com>)

Go Back

Print Page

Will spending more money and hiring more workers improve Torrance's emergency notification system?

City will spend \$300,000 to hire employees to put automated warnings on track

By Nick Green, Daily Breeze

Wednesday, October 19, 2016



Two Torrance City Council members have ripped plans to spend almost \$300,000 to hire three new municipal employees to handle emergency notifications to the public issued via a supposedly automated system that has repeatedly failed due to internal communication problems and human error.

The comments came during a lengthy City Council meeting on safety issues revolving around the Torrance Refinery that dragged on until the early hours of Wednesday

morning.

In some of the strongest public statements made yet by council members over the failures of the Torrance Alerts system, Tim Goodrich warned of potential repercussions to jobs should municipal officials fail to ensure the system works effectively when needed.

"How is three more bodies going to make this more effective?" Goodrich asked, adding that his confidence in the city's ability to provide accurate information to residents was shaken.

"It has been a year and a half now, we've had numerous instances where we've had to really test the system in action and we still haven't gotten it right," he added. "If we don't get this right soon the public is going to lose faith in the system. ... I really hope it works because at some point we've got to have some accountability on this."

A little over 14,000 people have signed up for the alerts.

The issue dates back to February 2015 when the entire community was shaken by a massive blast at the then ExxonMobil Torrance Refinery, but a public emergency notification system largely failed.

The latest failure came Oct. 11 when a lengthy power failure prompted the refinery to belch massive flares and thick black smoke for hours, while emergency protocols were activated that asked residents citywide to shelter in place.

But automated calls were late or contradictory or both, the city's school district never received any notifications and some emergency systems such as barriers to close nearby roads failed to operate without power, officials admitted.

Goodrich managed to extract an admission from City Manager LeRoy Jackson that the notification system had actually never been publicly tested, although he admitted with a nervous laugh that it worked fine internally among a relatively small number of municipal officials.

"Maybe we need to test our communication system," Goodrich suggested.

The three staffers — as well as another existing employee who would be reassigned — would staff a new Emergency Operations Center around the clock to communicate with the public.

The estimated annual cost of \$276,000 will be partially offset by refinery owner PBF Energy, which has pledged \$140,000 annually to support the program.

But Councilman Mike Griffiths expressed doubt that simply throwing money and bodies at the problem would do any good.

"I'm not confident in our staff's ability to determine what they need to say and when they need to say it," he said after the meeting. "Based on the last year and a half I'm not optimistic more people will solve the problem."

Antonie K. Churg, a member of the Torrance Refinery Action Alliance, described the additional staffing as a "pork project" in an email to the panel.

"These three bureaucrats will twiddle their thumbs 360 days a year — doing nothing to prevent an accident," she said. "Maybe they will be available to frantically call 150,000 people when the refinery does have a serious incident. But Torrance has already contracted ... to do the job electronically at \$35,000 a year.

Nevertheless, the council voted 6-1 with only Griffiths opposed to spend the money. Officials hope the center will be operational early next year.

Officials with PBF Energy and Southern California Edison — which accepted fault for the most recent outage — were on hand to apologize and pledged to up their game in an effort to perform better in the future.

"It is not the way we intend to operate and it does not live up to the commitment I've made to you in the past," said Jeffrey Dill, president of PBF's Western region.

The city is also considering another layer of refinery oversight, in response to suggestions made by some residents and new Councilman Milton Herring.

The city will explore hiring an independent safety advisor to look at systems in place to monitor any release of potentially deadly hydrofluoric acid during budget deliberations next year, Jackson said.

Despite Mayor Pat Furey's animated insistence that, for example, proposing a ban on the acid that could kill or injure tens of thousands in a catastrophic release was outside the city's purview, residents urged officials to lobby for a ban anyway.

[Go Back](#)

[Print Page](#)

URL: <http://www.dailybreeze.com/general-news/20161019/will-spending-more-money-and-hiring-more-workers-improve-torrances-emergency-notification-system>

© 2016 The Daily Breeze (<http://www.dailybreeze.com>)